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Red Roads from Realism: theorising relationships between technique and theme in the cinema of Andrea Arnold

Abstract

Andrea Arnold is one of the most critically discussed and debated of all early-twenty-first century British filmmakers. This article starts from a proposition that the unusual amount of attention Arnold's work has attracted to date stems not only from its undeniable cinematic accomplishment, but also its ambiguous positioning vis-à-vis domestic film and television traditions (primarily, social realist ones). Taking Arnold's debut feature *Red Road* (2006) as a major case study and using *Fish Tank* (2009) and *Wuthering Heights* (2011) for comparison, I attempt to respond to that ambiguity by outlining, and providing illustrative examples of, some key characteristics, both formal and thematic, visible within Arnold's feature-length cinema. These include her typical privileging of the individual and psychological over the collective and social, her pronounced interest in challenging binary oppositions between ideas of the human and the animal, and her highly developed awareness and expressive use of audiovisual form and style.

Keywords: Andrea Arnold, *Red Road*, *Fish Tank*, *Wuthering Heights*, British cinema, social realism, the animal, audiovisual style

Introduction

Few early-twenty-first-century British writer/directors are as internationally recognised as Andrea Arnold. This elevated status could be explained in several ways. One could stress the speed of Arnold's entrenchment, with a 2005 Oscar and Cannes Jury Prizes in 2006 and 2009, within the front rank of present-day

Anglophone auteurs: no success story intrigues quite like a supposedly overnight one. Little wonder, that many seem fascinated by Arnold's career because of the widespread perception of her as an artist who 'seemed to emerge out of nowhere' (Christie 2011) at the new century's start.

This essay starts from a different position. Rather than seeing Arnold's unusual talent as emanating from nowhere, the intense commentary her work has attracted to date can be understood in terms of a collectively felt need to place Arnold's films within a wider cinematic context (or contexts) – *and* a pronounced uncertainty as to what the latter might be. One contemporary response to *Wasp* (2003) opined, for example, that the film 'ticks all the boxes of angry social-issue drama, but . . . with great sensitivity and feeling for place and atmosphere' (Pulver 2005). Here is an indication of a fluid set of critical equations-cum-definitions – social realism *and*, social realism *but*, social realism *or* – that circulate around Arnold's movies. These works have been seen, variously, as British social realism in the conventionally understood sense – 'more than a touch of Ken Loach' (Kemp 2009: 59); an incremental evolution of that cinematic tradition – 'poetic social realist art cinema' (Horeck 2011: 170); a superseding of the same – 'post-social realist abstraction' (Fuller 2012: 77); or a calculated, cosmopolitan circumvention of it altogether – 'art film being deliberately manufactured for the international film festival circuit' (Martin-Jones 2009: 224). Numerous critics have little difficulty in agreeing that Arnold's films resonate; far less consensus exists, however, as to where the latter reside in cultural or historical terms.

This essay develops in part out of existing work (Murray 2007, 2012, 2015) on two Arnold features, *Red Road* (2006) and *Wuthering Heights* (2011), but here, I use the earlier movie as a primary case study and *Fish Tank* (2009) and *Wuthering*

Heights as occasional points of comparison in order to propose some defining characteristics of her directorial practice and interests to date. Discussion is organised under three headings – The Individual and the Social, The Animal and The Visual – which I use to try to identify key thematic preoccupations and formal preferences within an especially distinguished British filmmaking career.

The Individual and the Social

Like Arnold's feature work more generally, *Red Road* strikes a precise balance in its adjudication between different kinds of landscape, some private and psychological in nature, others public and physical. Arnold's interest in exterior topography stems from her apparent conviction that people are profoundly shaped by the places they inhabit. Depicting places constitutes an effective way of delving deep into the hidden complexities of people. In *Red Road*'s case, the specific ways in – and times at – which the film has recourse to the austere, borderline surrealistic spectacle of the eponymous tower blocks demonstrate the extent to which the work's title 'points' towards '[a] mix of modes' that coexist within the text: 'Red Road is a real place, but also signifies [the central character's] journey into danger, often explicitly coded as sexual danger' (Sillars and Macdonald 2008: 195-196). In Arnold's hands, the repeated sight of dilapidated state-sponsored skyscrapers 'registers a history of uneven development and the persistence of social and economic inequities' within modern Britain, while simultaneously offering 'a striking visual symbol for the alienation and anomie of characters' (Burke 2007: 178). As Nick Roddick usefully suggests, 'we in Britain can find ourselves viewing modern realist cinema . . . as though any film with a back-to-back terrace (or its modern equivalent, a tower block) must be primarily about the social relations of its characters' (2009: 19). But what Arnold's work privileges instead is 'a sense of an individual floating free of (or

alienated from, if you prefer) the society in which she [or he] nominally lives. . . . Arnold's films . . . are dominated entirely by a single point of view' (20).

The extent to which *Red Road* illustrates this interpretation can be gleaned from the fact that the first explicit sight and sound of the movie's titular setting occurs a full eighteen minutes into the narrative. Here, central character Jackie (Kate Dickie), a CCTV operator profoundly traumatised by the unexpected death of her partner and child some years before the film's narrative begins, brings the tower blocks up on a monitor at work and asks a colleague if she is 'right in thinking they house a lot of ex-prisoners?' But before this, other formal means have repeatedly suggested *Red Road's* overriding concern with another kind of location, and another kind of journey which is necessary to get to and through that place. Specifically, the colour red makes numerous metaphorically loaded appearances prior to the *Red Road* flats' introduction into proceedings. Jackie watches unseen as a red tabard-wearing night cleaner sings and dances at work; her married lover drives around with a red soft toy given to him by his child; Jackie's sister-in-law and the latter's new husband are clad in red and pink finery during their wedding ceremony and reception, as are an unnamed young girl and Jackie's elderly Aunt Kathy (Annie Bain) whose osteoporosis doesn't prevent her from wanting to dance, her reasoning being that 'we'll be bloody dead soon.' After leaving the wedding, Jackie sees a handwritten red shop-window sign advertising hamster babies for sale. Later again, the raw redness of the hair on the head of Clyde (Tony Curran), the man Jackie stalks for reasons unspecified for much of *Red Road's* narrative, shows up starkly as she follows his nocturnal rutting on CCTV; red bed linen then frames a sleepless Jackie before she rises to compulsively scour a hoard of old press cuttings that document the death of her loved ones and the subsequent trial of Clyde for their

manslaughter. Following a pattern by now well-established, these bitter relics are stored inside a tattered red carrier bag.

A primary colour's ubiquity underscores the central way in which *Red Road* conceives of its titular thoroughfare: less a notorious local address, more a universally applicable existential metaphor that functions as an 'indicat[ion of] the hazardous route that Jackie herself must follow, from guarded self-discipline towards a resolution that will necessitate the release of her emotional and sexual energies' (McGill 2006: 27). Arnold herself described the evolution of *Red Road*'s script as a process that 'started from the character and [her] emotional place, so I'd say the story is about Jackie and her journey . . . it could be universal . . . I didn't know Glasgow . . . as I was writing I was incorporating what I was seeing and the Red Road flats came into the story . . . the film shows a certain side of Glasgow and not [the city's] whole self' (Quoted in Rowin 2006). Moreover, Arnold has subsequently presented this way of working as a constant within her practice rather than a transient experiment associated with one feature only: 'I always try to work from the characters or the details outward, and the themes that present themselves come out of that' (quoted in Fuller 2012: 77). Such remarks speak of Arnold's consistent efforts to fashion creative working methods that encompass elements of local social realist filmmaking traditions, characterised by an overt and programmatic sense of socio-political engagement, while simultaneously exploring and extending beyond these lineages. In that sense, her cinema could be said to manifest 'an almost adversarial relationship with the real, determined to see what lies beyond' (Roddick 2009: 20). The extent to which *Red Road* 'disavows [but is also] keenly aware of' the Red Road flats' 'landmark' (Stewart 2012: 566) status within the recent history of Glasgow is discernible in the film's exploitation of a quintessential social realist setting (deprived

present-day urban tower block) in order to advance a more universal set of concerns and propositions. The latter defines the human condition as a journey marked at all stages by unavoidable necessity and unpredictable consequence: every individual must enter into active physical and emotional engagements with other people, but no individual knows where such social transactions will lead them. Eight of the nine diegetic deployments of the colour red predating the appearance of the Red Road flats are, for example, clearly linked to ideas of sexuality and procreation. Even the two instances that are not (the different kinds of scarlet woman that the night cleaner and Aunt Kathy represent) still emphasise the human body's pleasurable physical potential.

Of course, social and sexual exchange with others is precisely what a profoundly damaged Jackie has renounced, in a perverse attempt at self-protection. The red road she ultimately chooses to (re)tread, then, involves 're-engag[ing] with the world and her humanity' (Mullen 2006), exposing herself in the process to all the unforeseeable consequences – painful or pleasurable – which that leap of faith brings back into play. Thus, while links between *Red Road* and British social realist cinema are certainly not non-existent, they are also carefully and complexly qualified in nature. Other possible and plausible cinematic genealogies exist: *Red Road* might be seen, for example, as a form of 'first-person cinema' (Calhoun 2006) indebted to a pronouncedly introspective late-twentieth-/early-twenty-first-century tradition of European Art filmmaking. In using formal excess (in this case, ostentatious and heavily symbolic use of colour) to inhabit and explicate female experiences of grief, Arnold's debut feature closely recalls distinguished antecedents such as Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) or Carine Adler's *Under the Skin* (1997) (see Murray 2007). Ian Christie (2011) locates Arnold's *Fish Tank* within a tradition of European

art movies that offer humanistic portrayals of unhappy working-class teenagers: Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985) and the Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* (1999). But *Red Road* has alternatively been linked to traditions of film melodrama (Stewart 2012) and, more specifically, to a body of late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century British film and television dramas that foreground the experience of young women struggling against the twin demons of socio-economic deprivation and psychological despair (Brunsdon 2012: 463).

But to argue that Arnold's movies display such interest in the personal is not to claim that those works overlook the socio-political. As Tanya Horeck notes, while 'Arnold's films do not function as overt "social problem" movies,' their 'poetic, affective moments' and qualities undoubtedly 'offer insight into social relations' (2011: 171). Stepping away from *Red Road* for a moment, consider the thematic significance of the near-total extent to which the camera tails central character Mia (Kate Jarvis) in nearly every scene of Arnold's second feature, *Fish Tank*. And well that lens might: this teenage girl's gnawing frustration and alienation renders her a constantly moving target in more ways than one. As Mia perambulates around her local council estate specifically, not to mention a significant proportion of the county of Essex more generally, Arnold simultaneously conveys two things to her viewer. On one hand, Mia's unenviable experience of material and emotional poverty is placed squarely – not least because often literally – in the foreground. But on the other, the quasi-documentary images that constitute the backcloth to an unhappy young woman's wandering-cum-wondering teem with pointed and subtly interlocking vignettes of socioeconomic change in early-twenty-first-century Britain. Thus, *Fish Tank* functions not only as a remarkably sensitive portrayal of one person's uncomfortable accession into adulthood, but also as an acute anatomisation of a

paradoxical push and pull that influences the personal experience and expectations of many more within contemporary Britain. New private housing estates and ubiquitous media images of aspirational consumerism offer tantalising glimpses of domestic success and security, even as the traditionally proposed guarantor of such things (the nuclear family as social institution) becomes less achievable, or even desirable, in ordinary human lives as these are actually lived.

Something similar is evident in Arnold's adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Here, the director's casting of black actors (child Solomon Glave and adult James Howson) in the role of Heathcliff, a character she conceived as an abandoned or escaped African slave, attracted repeated critical comment (see, for example, Rose 2011; Abrams 2012) at the time of the film's release only a few months after the August 2011 London Riots. But while Arnold's decision in this regard acknowledges the long-term historical persistence of racist and colonialist discourses and practices within British society, her *Wuthering Heights* ultimately privileges an individual character study of child abuse's destructive consequences, whether perpetrated on a societal or familial level. The film is defined by a consistently ostentatious (because ostentatiously consistent) recasting of Brontë's original narrative as seen and experienced through Heathcliff's eyes. The events of the first 65 minutes are witnessed almost entirely from the physical (and, by extension, psychological) vantage point of this traumatised pubescent boy; the narrative's second half then pivots around the perspective of the young adult Heathcliff, a man of means returned to *Wuthering Heights* only to find his carefree childhood love (Shannon Beer) grown into a woman (Kaya Scodelario) who is trapped within the suffocating confines of staid bourgeois matrimony. Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* thus unfolds as a chain of pregnant, largely wordless vignettes in

which an imperfectly maturing human being watches, wonders, and wants in relation to his wider world.

The Animal

Given its typical prioritisation of private and psychological thematic terrain over public socio-political counterparts, not to mention its willingness to employ non-social realist modes of formal excess in order to do so, Arnold's cinema might be thought to open itself up to accusations of unwarranted aesthetic gentrification or rarefication, compared with many of her local peers' work. But something approaching the opposite has instead held true. *Red Road*, *Fish Tank* and *Wuthering Heights* are widely discussed in terms of their pronounced visceral qualities, their embodied affects – so much so, in fact, that a standard-issue adjectival roster has coalesced around an oeuvre a mere three-features-old: 'robust' (Corless 2011: 42), 'wild, brutal' (Raphael 2011: 36), 'raw' (Thomson 2010: 18), 'unself-conscious' (Fuller 2012: 77), 'corporeal' (Horeck, 2011: 171), 'visceral' (Bradshaw 2011; Thomson 2012: 43), and so on.

The frequency and intensity with which such critical views are advanced can be related to the clear visibility within Arnold's cinema of a strong desire to question and confound received (and often overlapping) binary oppositions between the human and the animal, the disciplined body and its disobedient, desiring counterpart, the socially acceptable and the socially abject. As Amy Raphael notes, any given Arnold movie 'is always happy to lean heavily on nature as a symbol of innermost and often unarticulated feelings' (2011: 35). *Red Road*, for instance, engages at length with a range of issues and insights associated with the idea of the animal, largely through the character of Clyde. Even his moniker resonates in this regard:

given that the Clyde is the river that flows through the centre of Glasgow, the fact that an actual waterway shares its name with an apparent wastrel gestures towards the notion that common-sense distinctions between human beings and the natural world they inhabit, not to mention between the allegedly enlightened and the irremediably elemental, are not quite as watertight as many might think.

Clyde's memorably abrupt and explicit introduction into *Red Road*'s narrative makes much the same point. Jackie first witnesses him prowling Glasgow's post-industrial tundra before he pauses momentarily to fuck an anonymous woman on a litter-strewn patch of waste ground. She frantically tries to keep her prey in view via CCTV camera, but is confronted instead with the eerie spectacle of an urban fox scuttling across a deserted street. Apart from forming yet another early association of the colour red with ideas of sexuality (and all the secondary forms of social congress that stem from and/or are dependent upon the sexual act), the possible thematic inferences here are multiple. Jackie's seemingly disproportionate recoil from surveillance images of the underclass after dark speaks of the extent to which, in early-twenty-first-century Britain, an entire disenfranchised social stratum is routinely figured as an untamed threat to the decency, domesticity and security of a fretful wider polis. At first glance, several of Clyde's actions and utterances only seem to bolster such class-related prejudice. His past drug misuse resulted in the deaths of Jackie's partner and child, while his attempted present-day seduction of Jackie is one in which 'get[ting] to know' a prospective conquest involves enquiring what her 'cunt tastes like.'

While none of this suggests the kind of man one takes home to Mother, Arnold ultimately figures Clyde's animality as a complex phenomenon, 'feral, sexy and menacing all at once' (Felperin 2006: 35), not least because it is anything but

wholly compromised in nature. Particularly significant in this regard is the gendered quality of *Red Road*'s examination of mushrooming surveillance culture within contemporary Britain. One could argue that Jackie personifies, not least by virtue of her biological sex, the skewed perspective of a hysterical nanny state fixated by the misguided notion that it protects/polices its most deprived citizens best by infantilising them through a process of round-the-clock observation. Clyde, by contrast, exemplifies a diametrically opposed, ostentatiously masculinised ideological pole. Despite the trauma inflicted by his unintentional killing of Jackie's loved ones and the lengthy prison term that followed, Clyde (unlike Jackie) seems to recognise no intrinsic need to record, restrict or redirect the instinctually dictated, and therefore unpredictable, nature of many human interactions. Just before having sex with Jackie in his flat, for instance, Clyde expresses disinterest in moulding a wood carving-in-progress into any premeditated shape of his own choosing, arguing instead that 'every piece of wood is different . . . you're supposed to let it be whatever it wants.' That statement is doubly defiant in light of the fact that Clyde's carving skills emanate from rehabilitative attempts, during his incarceration, to furnish him with employable skills. While clearly bearing very real grief and guilt for his criminal actions, Clyde nonetheless exits an extended period of Foucauldian disciplining profoundly sceptical of the legitimacy or efficacy of state-sponsored disciplinary institutions and actions. His *laissez faire* logic is the antithesis of the uneasy (because insatiable) desire for complete social knowledge and control represented by Jackie and her omniscient banks of cameras and screens.

In this sense, a description of Clyde uttered by one of his seemingly numerous sexual conquests – 'you're a fucking animal' – contains within it two very different perspectives. The first of these is strategically played with in *Red Road*'s

early stages, while the second is proposed in all sincerity as the film draws to a close. The first perspective articulates the societal hostility and suspicion that routinely descends on people like Clyde, not to mention the disenfranchised social stratum he personifies. Arnold's occasional comments regarding her cinema's preferred model of class politics are relevant here. She has argued that movies such as *Red Road* and *Fish Tank* seek to resist widespread domestic demonisation of working-class characters and cultures by refusing to dismiss them as devoid of emotional, ethical and/or aesthetic substance and succour. Complaining about the ubiquity and monotony of 'middle-class' critics who 'always see films about the working class as being grim, because the people in the film don't have what they have,' Arnold claims to 'very much get the feeling that I'm seeing a different place. People [have] kept asking me about grim estates [but] I tried not to mean that . . . estates are great places . . . full of people, they're full of life . . . that's how most people live' (quoted in Mullen 2009: 17). This self-proclaimed attempt to find interest, integrity and involving imagery within locations and lives routinely caricatured as intrinsically deprived or debased, the stereotypical stuff of British 'misery cinema' (Fuller 2011: 36), is a theme which will be picked up again during this essay's concluding section on Arnold's visual style.

Returning, however, to the two thematic perspectives that resonate in relation to Clyde's description as a 'fucking animal', the second contains a truth that the film's conclusion ultimately compels Jackie to (re)acknowledge in relation to herself. *All* human beings are animals possessed of (and by) the instinct to fuck; individuals crave and carve out physical and emotional ties with others because those linkages constitute a powerful way to anchor the vagaries of existence. But the primal power such drives and desires exert also entails a troubling paradox, one which Jackie's

experience of loss illustrates with painful clarity. The creation of close bonds with other people (and the creation of other people to bond closely with) imperils as much as it protects. The ties that bind can also be broken in any number of ways that lie beyond individual prediction or control. *Red Road* articulates an understanding of human identity and society within which animalistic instinct and urges represent the unavoidable wellspring of pleasure and pain within peoples' lives. Thus, while Michael Stewart's description of Jackie as 'a sphinx' (2012: 559) invokes a very specific intellectual history of psychoanalytically informed feminist film theory and suggests that she is an aberrant figure, emotionally and psychologically speaking, his metaphor could also be read in a universal and non-judgemental way. In being (and behaving as) a creature visibly grafted together from a diverse range of impulses and identities – human and animal, civilised and instinctual – Jackie simply exemplifies the human state as Arnold conceives it.

The extent to which that conception might be understood as a signature one can be gleaned from its prominence within Arnold's subsequent feature work. In *Fish Tank*, for example, the director simultaneously acknowledges *and* undercuts the abject status conventionally accorded to animal states within contemporary social discourse. On one hand, scripted dialogue is liberally peppered by animal-inspired insults: Tyler (Rebecca Griffiths) teasingly calls her mum and new boyfriend, Conor (Michael Fassbender), 'lovebirds,' while Mia later tells the latter that his aftershave makes him smell of 'fox piss.' But on the other, *Fish Tank* also insists that representing human beings as animals can be a way of seeing, as opposed to scorning, the true natures of those individuals. In this regard, it is no accident that the first other inhabitant of Mia's council flat that viewers see is not human, but canine: Tennent's, a black Staffordshire bull terrier. Moreover, the animal's name is itself a

pun pointedly predicated on a zoomorphic homonym; if Mia's home shelters one animal called Tennent's, it also contains three other tenants – Mia, Joanne (Kierston Wareing) and Tyler – who, Arnold suggests, are animals too. This is subliminally emphasised throughout the film's running time: most scenes that take place in the flat foreground, at some stage or other, an animal-inspired element of interior decoration. These range from the glaringly obvious (the large image of a tiger that adorns Mia's bedroom door) to the more subtle (the paw-print pattern decorating Tennent's dog blanket, visible at one point while Mia sulks on the living room sofa). No accident either that *Fish Tank*'s opening and closing lines of dialogue confuse and confound the dividing line between human and animal identities and states; Mia tells a friend to 'ring me back, you bitch' as the movie begins, while Tyler, confused by her sister's stated destination of Cardiff at the narrative's end, asks her departing sibling (in another zoomorphic homonym) to 'say hello to the whales [sic] for me.'

Similar directorial thinking also comes strongly to the fore in Arnold's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. Rather than acceding to the popular stereotype of Heathcliff as a conveniently watertight receptacle for all that is semi-, sub-, or inhuman within the book, Arnold instead highlights the extent to which a systematic undermining of boundaries between human society and the animal kingdom in fact stalks Emily Brontë's original pages from beginning to end. Granted, many of the novel's zoomorphic metaphors attach themselves specifically to Heathcliff, who is compared at one point, for example, to a cuckoo (in the nest) (Brontë 2006: 40). But a collective – and thus, consensual – apprehension of human identity and experience as intrinsically animal in character also forms a central way in which many of the book's characters make sense of the world and their relationships within it. The maid Nelly Dean repeatedly compares her treatment at the Earnshaw and

Linton residences to that of a dog (Brontë 2006: 86); Cathy presents the jealous vying between herself and her sister-in-law, Isabella, for Heathcliff's affections as a feline quarrel (Brontë 2006: 123); and Heathcliff scornfully belittles Edgar Linton, Cathy's husband, by describing him as a lamb (Brontë 2006: 40). In this way, the literary *Wuthering Heights* exemplifies an idea that animates Arnold's filmmaking and Brontë's writing alike – the belief that, in the former's words, 'we are animals and not separate from nature, but part of it' (quoted in Curzon Cinemas, 2011).

Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* therefore pivots on the conception – and celebration – of childhood as the stage in the human lifecycle when people are most aware and accepting of the animal qualities of existence. While the novel's adolescent Heathcliff sneeringly dismisses Edgar and Isabella's domesticated pet dog as 'a heap of warm hair' (Brontë 2006: 56), Arnold repeatedly appropriates that image in a positive manner, as a way of communicating the pleasurable and sustaining aspects of animal ways of being and behaving in the world. An early close-up foregrounds the prepubescent Heathcliff's hand resting on a sheepskin blanket as he awakens at the Heights for the first time. During his first ride out with Cathy on the moors, Arnold's camera pointedly links the girl's long dark hair to her horse's similarly coloured mane; a close-up of uncombed human locks swamps the screen as Heathcliff completes a fleetingly blissful moment of physical and emotional satiation by leaning in to envelop himself in the scent and warmth of Cathy's tresses. Compare this image to the mature protagonist's similar view late on in the film, by which time childhood's freedom has given way to the dreary proprieties of adulthood. Grown-up Cathy's hair is now just out of physical reach because she and Heathcliff ride separate horses; the rich reds of her velvet riding attire cannot compensate for the lost 'feral intensity' (Stables 2011) of longingly remembered pre-adult pleasures.

The pursuit of the visceral that Arnold foregrounds here in relation to her *Wuthering Heights* also manifests itself across her entire oeuvre more generally.

The Visual

The final way in which this essay approaches *Red Road* as an exemplar of Andrea Arnold's subsequent directorial practice relates to that film's pronounced and self-reflexive fascination with the manifold pleasures, practices and pitfalls associated with acts of looking, the respective states of watching and being watched, and 'and the transfer of power within that exchange' (Mullen 2009: 19). Indeed, Arnold's approving description of an attempt to film certain scenes within *Wuthering Heights* using only candlelight as illumination – 'it was very dark, but I loved the fact that you had to be *watching*' (quoted in Thomson 2012: 50, original author's emphasis) – offers a useful route into appreciation of the remarkable emphasis on visual apprehension, sensation and innovation that characterises her cinema as a whole. *Red Road* explores this territory via strategic appropriation of what was in 2006 (and still is in 2015) a contemporarily resonant domestic socio-political issue: escalating levels of societal paranoia and mistrust, and a mushrooming technological apparatus of Orwellian observation that arguably exacerbates such anxieties as much as it ameliorates them. Only a few weeks before the domestic theatrical release of Arnold's movie, a report submitted to the UK government's Information Commissioner drew attention to a startling statistic. There was, at that point in time, something like 4.2m CCTV cameras in Britain, one recording lens for every fourteen British lives waiting to be recorded. Moreover, that figure accounted for no less than 20 per cent of all CCTV cameras installed around the globe (Surveillance Studies Network 2006).

But, in keeping with Arnold's identity as a filmmaker who aims to adapt, rather than repeat, British social realist cinema's traditional practices and priorities, *Red Road* displays comparatively little obvious concern with the material and ideological reasons behind, or ramifications of, a domestic surveillance state's largely uncontested rise. Instead (and typically for Arnold), the film consciously privileges the individual, psychological and particular over the collective, social and general. *Red Road*'s primary interest in its CCTV theme stems from the latter's capacity to affectively/affectingly connote several phenomena closely related to Jackie's private experience: her initial traumatised and self-harming mental state; the distorted emotional reasoning that has led her to that lonely place; and her eventual tentative move towards a more healthy personal future.

Red Road develops a range of distinctive audiovisual strategies in order to employ closed circuit technology as a metaphor that underscores the near-total extent to which Jackie has closed herself off from circulation among others. Moreover, many if not most of the strategies in question also reappear in Arnold's later features. Firstly, there is the rare imagination and open-mindedness with which she identifies and explores unlikely forms of visual spectacle that profitably repay extended contemplation on her (and our) part. Arnold has described, for instance, the time-consuming, technically arduous process of re-filming *Red Road*'s CCTV footage multiple times (and in multiple digital and analogue formats) in order to emphasise and manipulate the intrinsic degradation of the surveillance material ('more than just story') for symbolic and aesthetic effect ('I tried to use it also as a way of reflecting Jackie's emotional state . . . this was especially true with the close-ups, which had a painterly quality when filmed and re-filmed' (quoted in Thomson 2007)).

Secondly, there is the striking immediacy, flexibility and ubiquity of Arnold's preferred hand-held shooting style, a device so central that it might conceivably obscure the visual sophistication and ambition of her directorial practice. The critical lexicon – raw, robust, wild, visceral – routinely rolled out in response to Arnold's movies is a double-edged implement, as capable of implying unfocused creative intent as it is of identifying distilled aesthetic or emotional affect. Add to this certain public comments about this director's working methods on set, and one can begin to appreciate the extent to which any attempt to better understand the nature of her visual signature also creates an opportunity to underestimate it. Arnold herself claims, for instance, that 'I try not to think . . . thinking is the enemy' (quoted in Mullen 2009: 19), while her regular cinematographer, Robbie Ryan, has observed that 'watching her directing style . . . if you were on the outside looking in, you would think there doesn't seem to be a lot happening . . . if people don't know what's going on then they think it's all a bit chaotic' (quoted in Creely 2009: 23).

Thirdly, there is the fact that Arnold's hand-held way of working – 'point-of-view-driven visuals' (Robbie Ryan quoted in Anon 2012: 32) – allows her movies to cultivate an exceptionally calibrated form of intimacy between diegetic character and extra-diegetic spectator. She describes the effect in question as 'mak[ing] it feel like we've dropped in on some people's lives. With a lot of films, people are sitting on the outside looking in . . . I want the audience to get a bit more intimately involved . . . they maybe can experience . . . a little bit more intensely' (quoted in Horeck 2011: 173). For this reason, camera position in *Red Road* and Arnold's other features typically oscillates between the world viewed over the central protagonist's shoulder and (somewhat less often) the world viewed through the central protagonist's eyes. The majority of scenes in which Jackie trails Clyde in person or on CCTV camera

are, for example, shot from an over-the-shoulder perspective. Jackie thus becomes a dark, blurred and heavily cropped shadow that clings to the frame's vertical edges: disembodied watcher rather than flesh-and-blood woman, a being that has systematically, masochistically reduced itself to a meagre assortment of self-destructive obsessions, compulsions and recollections.

In some ways, this third characteristic of Arnold's visual practice forms a productive feedback loop with the first one proposed above. If looking for tell-tale symptoms of this filmmaker's fascination with the fascination that images exert, we could do worse than acknowledge the frequency with which her cinema presents us with two intertwined forms of spectacle at once. *Red Road*, for example, foregrounds not only the digitally and/or socially degraded sights that Jackie pores over at work but also the sight of her pouring her capacity for human emotion and interaction into what flickers across the control-centre monitors. When Jackie first catches sight of the newly released Clyde on camera, for instance, two extreme close ups (one of pixelated content on a screen, the other of Jackie's eye perusing the former) accord broadly equal prominence to the separate spectacles of Clyde's rapidly extinguished coitus and Jackie's rapidly expanding iris, as another animal's momentary experience of ecstasy awakes her from anomie. Such moments speak of the extent to which Arnold's cinema consistently seeks out and celebrates visually facilitated forms of sensation, revelation and explication. As a result, in her movies audiences simultaneously look with *and* at the protagonists whose stories are being told.

Constraints of space prevent a comprehensive account of Arnold's visual sophistication. But in addition to these brief observations on matters such as colour symbolism and camera positioning, an illustrative sense of Arnold's formal intelligence and innovation as a filmmaker can also be gleaned from the variety of

CCTV-related compositional patterns that she deploys in order to underline Jackie's near-total suppression of selfhood in response to the death of her loved ones. Especially in its early stages, *Red Road* uses contrapuntal editing patterns to pointedly contrast the central character's relative sedation at work when she occupies a professional distance from the nameless individuals who pace an 'abstracted city of screens and cameras' with her obvious agitation when she finds herself in direct physical and emotional proximity to known people in 'a real, location-shot Glasgow' (Brunsdon 2012: 471). Shot/reverse shot and eye-line match editing are deployed most extensively and classically, for instance, during scenes that showcase Jackie's displaced digital encounters with unwitting others. *Red Road*'s opening sequence uses both compositional devices (with eye-line matching from Jackie's perspective only) to depict her happily spying on two of her favourite local characters, the dancing night cleaner and the dog-owner who faithfully tends to his ailing pet. At points such as these, Jackie momentarily exudes genuine human warmth, albeit for people she knows as pixels rather than in person.

That fact serves to underscore the tonal and formal difference that characterise scenes of direct social contact, such as the one in which Jackie and her married lover copulate in the physically and emotionally cramped conditions of his van. This sequence largely forgoes shot/reverse shot and eye-line match edits. Penetrated from behind, the only person Jackie can see is herself, via the reflection in one of the vehicle's wing mirrors. But downcast eyes refuse to acknowledge the presence of her suitor or herself within the moment: at this juncture, Jackie's emotional disengagement from the world seems near-complete. Similarly, her uncomfortable meeting with her father-in-law, Alfred (Andy Armour), at a wedding reception respects elements of classical shot/reverse shot grammar while also being,

as Michael Stewart points out, considerably 'more complex than this' (2012: 554). That complexity stems from the deliberate inversion of the one-sided eye-line match pattern (i.e., motivated by Jackie's perspective only) that structured the edit of the film's opening scene in the CCTV control room. Cuts moving from Alfred to Jackie (five out of the sequence's total of twelve) are conventionally motivated, following eye-line matches from his point of view. But cuts moving from Jackie to Alfred (also five in number) conspicuously lack this standard justification. Jackie refuses to meet her father-in-law's eye: the strength of the barriers she has erected between herself and her dead husband's family are stressed as a result.

Finally, Jackie's accidental face-to-face encounter with the dog-owner immediately after she leaves Alfred and the wedding is blocked in such a way as to refuse shot/reverse shot and eye-line matching altogether. The two characters stand side-by-side, gazing wordlessly into the same shop window: no form of contact, ocular or emotional, is instigated between them. These early scenes, and the varying ways in which they are edited, lay bare the terms of Jackie's long-term self-mutilation. Renouncing the social role and identity of an 'I' defined by direct physical and emotional engagement with her native community, she has instead turned herself into a distanced and dehumanised 'eye', a component part of the all-seeing Foucauldian hydra which Glasgow's elaborate CCTV network represents. So cauterised is Jackie that other people must be physically distant, anonymous and intermittent presences within her life before she is able to muster even the slightest of positive emotional connections to them.

Such moments of visual distillation, sophistication, ambition and imagination are legion within Arnold's cinema. For instance, a – indeed, perhaps *the* – major source of Mia's status as an intensely sympathetic central protagonist in *Fish Tank*

stems from the intensity of her desire to find human meaning and sustenance in the everyday sights that surround an apparently mundane and unenviable existence. Though she desires to be a dancer, Mia exhibits many skills that might make her a considerable director instead; this young woman is an active viewer, rather than (or as well as) an apparent victim, of the world in which she lives. Windows (both literal and figurative) endlessly attract Mia throughout the narrative's course, and resonant images therefore abound of her looking for things abstract and psychological by looking at things actual and physical. Mia's repeated aerial views of the estate from the deserted high-rise flat to which she retreats in order to practice her dance routines, her voyeuristic fascination with the erotic and emotional intensity of Joanne and Conor's abortive relationship, and the ardent sincerity of her scanning of television and online videos of R&B culture and choreography are all of significance here. The complexity of Mia's engagement with the latter images lies in the fact that she seems able to see past/through surface depictions of consumption and carnality (buff, bikini-clad bodies writhing on a yacht) in order to attain a profoundly humanistic alertness to the possibilities of camaraderie and collectivity (the mutual support and respect that amateur London breakdancers show each other in a homemade YouTube clip) within forms of contemporary culture that many, ostensibly more worldly observers might dismiss out of hand as crass commercialism. In this sense, Mia's personal actions and insight recall Arnold's aspirations of 'seeing a different place' (quoted in Mullen 2009: 17) with regard to what for her are the problematic class politics structuring much present-day British filmmaking and film criticism. We might even go so far as to see Mia as an authorial surrogate in several key regards, rather than an authorial subject pure and simple.

Arnold's version of *Wuthering Heights* also maintains and extends its creator's remarkable visual sensibility. The film's opening image, for instance, in which a shaky hand-held close-up contemplates a weathered grey wooden surface bearing a child's rude etching of the eponymous hilltop homestead and a farmyard animal tethered outside, testifies to Arnold's remarkable, and perhaps still-increasing, directorial ambition and sophistication. If Kate Bush once had the audacity to condense Emily Brontë's novel into a four-minute pop song, Arnold takes only six seconds or so to achieve a similar feat. Here, already, the film's key visual strategies and thematic preoccupations are clearly set out. The introductory emphasis on visual, as opposed to verbal, storytelling modes – the opening image is not just a picture, but a picture which tells a story – accurately promises a literary adaption within which the spoken word is kept to a bare minimum. More specifically, the etching's obvious naïveté communicates Arnold's reimagining of *Wuthering Heights* as a situation and story experienced and understood from a child's perspective. The ragged, uncontrolled nature of the knife strokes that constitute the image also presage another major theme, namely, the inherent difficulty of (and lasting psychological damage frequently incurred during) any child's attempts to make sense of the adult world's complex social and emotional transactions. Add to these inferences the shot's foregrounding of themes of animal nature and metaphor (the only protagonist visible in the child's drawing is an animal), oppression (the beast is tethered), isolation (the beast is alone), exclusion (the beast is prevented from entering the human habitation visible in the background), and exposure to the elements (the etching is created from an exterior perspective, looking at the house rather than from it), and one already has a notably comprehensive, complex and affective sense of the film yet to come.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to set out some of the reasons why Andrea Arnold's cinema has attracted significant critical attention and debate over the last decade or so – and why it should continue to do so as her career develops further. Few contemporary British filmmakers allow their audience as much scope for aesthetic, emotional, psychological and social exploration or sensation as Arnold does. Her work to date has uncovered new meaning and interest in established domestic cultural traditions and heritage, whether these relate to nineteenth-century literature or twentieth-century television and film. At the same time, and notwithstanding Arnold's ingenious attempts to avoid programmatic forms of politicking, her films also display a wholehearted – and, just as importantly, bighearted – engagement with a wide range of socio-political issues within present-day Britain, including questions of racial and class-based prejudice and disenfranchisement and contemporary gender and sexual politics. On top of this, the formal sophistication and innovation of Arnold's filmmaking is also a worthy subject of interrogation and discussion in its own right. The scale and variety of such achievements return us to one final way in which *Red Road* can be seen as a harbinger of what has emerged from its maker's career so far – and one way in which it cannot. As Brunsdon notes, Arnold's feature-making has from its earliest moments displayed an unusually acute and ambitious sense of the creative complexity and power of 'film direction' as a means of finding meaning in, and making meaning from, 'the silent world "out there"' (2012: 470) in front of the recording lens. Unlike her first central protagonist Jackie, however, Arnold has seemed in full and compassionate control of that process right from the very start.

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